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ABSTRACT

A recent one-on-one attempt by 17 Brown University students to "shadow" high school pupils for 1 day disclosed the bewildering complexity of high schools and the difficulties inherent in categorizing or evaluating them. This paper discusses the nature of this complexity. First, most high schools are densely populated work places. This "people density" is exacerbated by a frenetic schedule that allows little time or psychological space for teachers and contributes to feelings of isolation amid the crowd. Second, despite curriculum guides and standardized testing, each teacher is an individual entrepreneur creating his or her own world. Third, schools are synergistic places in which serious changes in one sector influence everything else in the school. A fourth obstacle to evaluating schools is their essential dailiness and the immediacy of the present moment. Understanding the nature of a particular school's tensions--or a particular classroom's tensions--is essential. Finally, there are variations in times and seasons when visiting schools. Evaluators must acknowledge the rich variety of any school, whatever its size. Schools must be seen whole, and their synergy must be understood. One must go well beyond published statements or school leaders' expressed policies or statistical analyses. Structured interviews must emerge out of a particular school's language and setting. Idiosyncracies must be carefully noted before generalizations and comparisons are attempted. (MLH)

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Assessment: A Cautionary Meditation from the Schools

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Remarks presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 16-20, Boston, Massachusetts.

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Assessment: A Cautionary Meditation from the Schools

Remarks at the 1990 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association

This spring Rick Lear, Jill Davidson and I are superintending a seminar for seventeen undergraduate and graduate students which involves a good deal of school visiting. As we do not have a great deal of time in each site, each student is assigned a single high school pupil to "shadow," to follow around as inconspicuously as possible for the entire school day. Each of our students keeps careful notes, and we gather afterwards to see if we can construct some ideas about the visited school, and especially about indications of "goodness", in Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's sense.

As each of our seventeen Brown students followed a pupil in what purportedly was the same high school, what was instantly evident was that there were within one building sixteen "schools" — sixteen distinct and demarked school worlds in which each of the shadowed youngsters "lived." The differences among these worlds were not merely those provoked by the differences among the pupils, but, also, by the particular pattern of courses taken, the particular youngsters in those classes and the particular teachers behind the desks. The bewildering variety within any school and the equivalent variety of experience in schooling that each pupil, or at best clusters of pupils, experience, leaps out. Such an understanding is, in my view, the beginning of wisdom about schooling.

For Rick and Jill and me, this exercise has been a useful reminder of the obvious, but too readily discarded fact that high and middle schools, even small ones, are richly complicated places. We are struck again by how difficult it is to categorize schools, or even to come to some satisfactory conclusion about a particular school, whether it is "good" or "not so good." One is reminded how much schools are like families, with strong or less strong willed individuals bouncing off one another in provocative or oblique or benign or loving ways. After a string of school visits, one often returns home wanly believing that chaos theory probably is a better vehicle for trying to understand the typical American high school than the

familiar devices of social science analysis in which we all were optimistically trained.

In this day when the evaluation community is being repeatedly asked to make *judgments* about schools — to assess their merit — this simple reality of the intricacy of such institutions needs to be endlessly attended to. Let me take a minute to set out in detail the nature of some of this complexity, however familiar it may be.

First of all, most high schools are densely populated — indeed, the most densely peopled workplaces that most Americans will ever experience. No self-respecting business office would pack as many people into the square feet normally assigned to senior high school students, and no serious business leader would stand for a moment shouldering her or his way through halls into which a bell has just exploded the two thousand youngsters of a typical senior high school. This "people density" is exacerbated by a frenetic schedule, with few "appointments" held for more than fifty or sixty minutes. Thus the crowding is attenuated, with people jostling one another in a colorful, usually joyful way at frequent intervals.

For teachers there is neither much time nor much space, including psychological space. Few teachers have either the hours for reflection or the incentives to see their schools whole in order to make sense of this colorfully chaotic and always cacophonous mass of adolescents. And so they go their own ways, and the world of schooling of those students who happen to come, however briefly, into their classrooms is a world little connected with other teachers' worlds around them — even though the density of the school population is so heavy. Thus is there this paradox in schools: isolation amid the crowd. Such an isolation amid a multitude is stressful, hardly an appropriate condition for teachers to get the perspective necessary to serve as a professional members of a coherent community. And so a result emerges: schools are notably incoherent, strikingly mindless places, as commentators from John Dewey to Charles Silberman to John Goodlad have carefully chronicled.

Secondly, the way the workplace is designed for teachers and the way that incentives in the school play out reinforce the notion of

each instructor as an individual entrepreneur. Yes, there are curriculum guides and textbooks and standardized tests and collective "staff development," but the fact still remains that each teacher creates his or her own world, to a greater rather than a lesser degree. As countless researchers have found, the striking difference in standards and even content in sections of a course having the same title and "number" is astonishing — a result, among other things, of this isolation. Thus a statement such as that a school has "a strong English department" is, beyond vague generality, on the whole largely meaningless, or no more meaningful or useful a conclusion than, say, that the average American shoe size might be 8' 1/2. The parts are of more consequence than their sum or average.

Third, as Seymour Sarason has repeatedly reminded us, schools are necessarily synergistic places. Everything important in a school affects everything else that is important in that school. A change in the mathematics curriculum affects both the necessary scholarly retooling of the mathematics teachers and, most likely, a change in those teachers' attitudes toward mathematics and its teaching. Further, serious change in a curriculum will almost always affect the schedule, and the schedule affects the allocations of times of all departments, not just those of mathematics. The allocation of time that teachers spend in classes affects the staffing pattern, and thus in due course hiring and firing. Sarason has shown how efforts to "reform" merely one part of a school — say a portion of its curriculum — are doomed to failure because the other important elements of school operations — what he calls the school's "regularities" — will smother this intruder in their midst. From a researcher's point of view, one cannot understand or assess a school's curriculum or its schedules or its teachers or anything else of consequence without seeing how each interacts and is affected by the others.

Fourth — and poorly appreciated by folks who have not spent a good many years themselves in schools — is the essential dailiness of school-keeping. Adolescents' horizons, for all kinds of understandable reasons — their concerns about themselves about themselves as individuals, their timely narcissism — are "close in." Accordingly, immediate events have great moment — a scuffle in a cafeteria, the firing of a teacher, the breakup of two popular young lovers. Again, analogies to families are more useful here than

analogies to mature, relatively stable organizational settings such as shop floors and business offices. Teachers have to struggle to get kids to think even a little bit about their futures. The present is omnipresent. Fail to understand the kids' "present" and you fail to understand that school.

The effect of this dailiness complicates the assessment of any school. Answers even to general questions by students and teachers inevitably reflect immediate pressures and celebrations, and if the questioner is unaware of these, distortions can result. Further, those who come to visit schools with an already established and structured set of inquiries may easily miss the point of why a school is the way it is at that moment.

As a high school principal during the 1970s I was particularly aware of this. Our school — admittedly, due to its residential and selective character, quite different from many American high schools — was the subject of the usual barrage of questionnaires and quickie visits by researchers. The former — questionnaires — were particularly vexing as most often the questions, however sensible from the point of view of the researcher, did not precisely fit our situation, or indeed that of the public high schools nearby us. Usually we simply put such questionnaires aside, hoping they'd go away; but in many cases the researchers kept yapping at us until we sent them back. Ultimately we "filled them out" by eyeballing the answers, making guesses about statistical slices of the school which the researcher wanted but the data for which were not collected in the manner that the researcher requested. I always chuckled to see the ultimate reports from such questionnaires, as these were usually elegant statistical tours de force of data barely worth the paper upon which they had been collected.

Very simply you have to know a school well in order to know not only *which* questions to ask but *how* to ask any question, however general. To do otherwise is either to distort or to miss important points or, usually, both.

Tip O'Neill was wont to say that "all politics is local." One can accurately say as well, "all education is local." This is due not only to the dailiness already mentioned, but more. The tensions which are

inevitable and desirable in all education — the tensions of minds being made up, positions taken, mythologies exposed and new avenues revealed — are dealt with at the classroom or at the most the principal's office level. Recently I was at a school where a group of teachers were all presenting the play Inherit the Wind to a ninth grade Humanities cluster. A couple of the students were Jehovah's Witnesses of unusual commitment. How do we teach this play in a way respectful both to those *particular* youngsters' deeply-held views, to the intents of the playwright and to the historical reality of the Scopes trial? Generalized answers to these important questions were helpful, but not governing, as the particular setting -- and especially the extent of trust within that setting -- and the particular students were the critical elements. Those who would mandate curricula and values from on high utterly miss this point, particularly as values as they take hold in the hearts and minds of students do so as the result of creative tension caused by a *particular* group of younger and older people at a *particular* time in a *particular* place.

Again, such tension is the heart of good education: one is always threatened by confronting something new or, even more, having to change one's mind. Understanding the nature of a particular school's tensions — or a particular classroom's tensions — is the absolutely essential, but not sufficient step toward assessing the effectiveness of that institution. Again one is pushed back on the immediate and the local.

Finally, there are times and there are seasons. As a high school principal I always wished people to visit our school in October and never in February. In many high schools in this country, the way to get test scores up is to give the examination right after lunch on Friday, when only the most dutiful students are still around. Visit a high school on the first warm day of spring and one won't find much academic intensity there. Give the national assessment tests when a school is in the middle of a flu epidemic and you will get low scores.....

None of what I lay before you here is either new or surprising. It all is really no more than common sense. Taking full account of it, being respectful of its implications, is something else. Let me dwell

on a number of these implications as they should affect the work of those who would assess schools.

Most important is to accept the complexity — the rich variety — of any school, whatever its size. Schools must be seen whole, and their synergy understood. This means reversing the social science scholars' usual penchant for classification and then reduction, for the breaking down of schools into categories or steps or spheres. One thinks, for instance, of the so-called "class size" research. Most often, correlations are simply made between numbers of kids in a classroom and measured performance. This is as meaningful as measuring the effect of surgical procedures alone on arresting of certain forms of cancer. To continue this morbid comparison, the fact is that oncological treatment usually involves a sequence or mix of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. So it is with teaching and class size: meaningful results absolutely depend on numbers small enough so that the teachers know the kids *and* a pedagogy that provokes kids to engage *and* a school culture that unequivocally fosters such engagement. Leave out any one of these aspects and one misses the point entirely — just as one does in sloppy and incomplete medical research.

To avoid schools' insistent richness is to distort reality. Further, we all too often witness researchers who simply decide to go ahead with trivial and flimsy evidence, explaining that "these are all the data that we happen to have." One hopes that our physicians do not so act; and such should no longer be tolerated in education. The all too easy assessment of the goodness or badness of schools on the basis of, say, 38-item multiple choice "achievement" tests combined with brief "checklist" visits is as absurd as it is unfair.

Because of their complexities, schools must be plumbed deeply. The different "schools" understood by each of our Brown students shadowing pupils must be woven together carefully until the fabric's patterns begin to emerge. One must go well beyond published statements or the expressions of policy of school leaders or the enumeration of those aspects of the school that can be reduced to statistics. Intense, even joyful engagement in matters of importance is what characterizes good schools, and this kind of engagement is

rarely exhibited by the checklists of those who would search out "excellent" or less than excellent schools.

Assessors should see the idiosyncrasy first, the nature of the dailiness of a particular school. The "structured" interviews must emerge out of the language of the particular school, however this is ultimately adapted to more generalized, pertinent questions that an assessor might employ. One has to keep the pupils in mind: their world is a narrow one; the likelihood that they will engage powerfully on important ideas is very probably conditioned by the particular adults in particular classes in that particular setting; and the special incentives for good work are in their most powerful form likely to be subtle and local and varying over time.

Simply, see schools whole, observe them patiently and carefully, and take respectful note of their idiosyncrasies.

Assessors and researchers should also remember well the first dictum of the physician: do no harm. Unwittingly — one must frankly say thoughtlessly — many researchers *do* inflict harm, usually by failing to question the category systems which they carry into schools. For example, very offensive to many teachers is the phrase "at risk." Such is usually ill-defined, but it is always patronizing; and, further, it sets up expectations that certain kids (however they may be enumerated in a particular locality) are somehow less likely to learn. Another commonly used word that causes heartache is "dropout." The fact of the matter is that most of us in this room would drop out of the majority of the schools in this country that have high dropout rates, this because these are disrespectful, mindless and often dangerous schools. Dropping out, thus, might in fact be a sensible decision. Thus, folks who simply say that a high dropout rate must be corrected by some external dropout prevention program completely miss the point which is that the school itself is deeply troubled and requires fundamental rethinking and sensitive support.

An even more harmful artifact of conventional evaluation is the acceptance by assessors of the basic configuration of schools as we know them. High School Now and Hereafter Forevermore will be English/mathematics/social studies/science/language/art/music/

business education/physical education and the rest. Only credentialled specialists will teach those particular subjects. Guidance will be given by professional guidance counselors. Folks certified at the junior high level will never teach at the senior high level.....

The profound anonymity and softness of the typical American high school is to some significant degree the result of the slicing up of kids' minds and hearts into separate bits, each bit having its own specialist to minister unto it. The fractionalization and excessively narrow professionalism of the typical American high school does not even stand the test of simple common sense analysis, but assessment policies which mindlessly accept those categories and "hold schools accountable" for some kind of "delivered service" in each freezes the inadequate institution as we know in its mediocre, present shape. The result is powerfully conservatizing and makes serious reform profoundly difficult.

Finally, the seemingly endless effort to *compare* as well as to judge individual children or individual schools or school systems is, if taken too far, corrupting. In our day of Wall Charts and the reduction of the complexities of the human mind to generalized numbers, we test authenticity, even common sense credibility. Too often do we compare institutions the nature of which we only dimly understand, thus sending false messages and engaging in what are frankly appalling unfairnesses and distortions. Such is harmful, to public policy as well as to the schools being assessed. Whatever the political pressure for comparison might be, the research community must absolutely insist that the complexity of any institution put under the social science microscope must be honored if there is to be sensitive accuracy in assessment.

What does this mean for assessment? To my eye it means a much greater use of ethnographic and qualitative methods. It means greater patience, and more careful documentation. It means seeing schools over time, using the scholarly resources of historians.

One thinks of the careful work using a notion of "portraiture" by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot or the thoughtful studies of small numbers of schools by Mary Metz, Philip Cusick, and Linda McNeil. I

am particularly respectful — having been a close observer of it — of the approach taken by my colleagues in The Study of High Schools, Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar and David Cohen, who produced the volume, The Shopping Mall High School. They and a dozen field workers immersed themselves over more than a full academic year in the lives of but fifteen secondary schools, these clustered in five parts of the country. Their initial forays in the field were open-ended, and they listened closely to the particular voices they heard in each setting, only thereafter developing protocols and common questions for all schools. Countless feet of audio tape were taken, and the most important of these transcribed into over 20,000 typed pages of field notes. These were joined by over 10,000 pages of printed material collected from each of the fifteen schools, and the whole was analyzed and reanalyzed. From that exercise, the authors strained out a set of themes, ones which happily and not unexpectedly ring true. It is important to note that none of my colleagues working on The Shopping Mall High School book would categorically say that any one school was "excellent" or "very bad." Schools — again, just as families and hospitals and churches — are too complicated for that. In a word, *the complexity was respected,* and as a result our understanding of how these complicated institutions at a particular moment in their history appeared to work has been richly and accurately extended.

I have chosen an odd and somewhat cumbersome title for these remarks: "Assessment: A Cautionary Meditation from the Schools." The word *meditation* is deliberately chosen. It is a word denoting contemplation and the expectation of continued thought. My view is that our current view of the nature of schooling is usually limited and often profoundly flawed. We need to think harder, and to be humbler in addressing this very complicated and rich social institution. Before my nine years of service as a high school principal, I confess myself to have thought that schools were relatively easily categorized. In the principal's role, I insistently learned of the inevitable complexity of schools, and to be intensely respectful of it. Most school assessments these days do not meet that standard.

The *cautionary* plea naturally arises. Much assessment misses the point, misses the essence of schools, distorts what's going on, and

as a result gives both poor information to those who wish schools to be accountable and erroneous signals about the direction of reform. The very shape of research and assessment itself may do harm, in its inattention, mindlessness and disrespect for the complex fabric of schools.

Asscssment is a Big Word Abroad in the Land, and insisted upon by political leaders. "We want to hold teachers and students accountable." In the past, schools and teachers and students haven't been "visibly accountable," for the simple reason that local leaders and educators knew how complex such assessment would have to be and feared its results. That is, our assessments have been limited because we wanted them limited. However, today we seem to want more assessment, and that is fine, an overdue impulse. However, the assessment must be respectful of the entity being assessed, carried out in a thoughtful and sophisticated manner and presented with the humility required of a research community which has only barely begun to plumb the complexities of human learning and the working of those intensive human communities called schools.

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